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ABSTRACT

Crucial to the success of a writing program are the writing instructor's perception of and response to the quality of student writing. There are three areas to be considered: students' grades, students' writing, and the instructor's comments. Unfortunately, disparity in these areas often gives contradictory indications about the instructor's ability to teach and evaluate writing. The majority of writing instructors act out of ignorance. They simply do not know how to evaluate a piece of writing. Consequently, they need to be taught to play the role of both reader and critic. By approaching a piece of writing in this role, they will then have a basis for making objective and sensible comments to the students. Concentration should be given to the areas of content, organization, grammar, and mechanics. The stress placed on these individual areas emphasizes the need to consider the paper as an entire unit that works together to produce an effect on the reader. Comments on first drafts should be sparing and directed toward content and structure. Additional detail, thorough development, and consistency in grammar and mechanics can be elicited through questions. As readers, the instructors can ask for clarification so that the writer will not be misunderstood. Once instructors become aware of the areas to look for in determining the quality of a paper and become comfortable with the role of reader and critic, they can grade papers with confidence. (HOD)

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EVALUATING THE EVALUATOR

As director of a large writing program, one of my responsibilities is to monitor the program's effectiveness. This includes mundane, objective tasks such as testing and placing students, collecting and analyzing a maze of data. But by far the most important and difficult aspect of my job is monitoring the ability of the individual instructors. This ability can be measured by two standards: 1) how the students write as a result of having taken the course, and 2) how the instructors perceive the students' writing. The instructors' perception of and response to the quality of student writing are crucial to the program's success. Evaluating the instructors' ability to perform this task competently need not be devastating to either the instructors or director, but it must be honest. There are three areas to be considered: student's grades, students' writing, and the instructors' comments. Unfortuntely, disparity in these areas often gives contradictory indications about the instructors' ability to teach and evaluate writing.

Composition instructors profess the ability to do many things: teach writing, improve discrete skills, evaluate progress. Assuming that this profession is true, we assign grades to students' work, grades that make the difference in their passing or failing the course, staying in or leaving school. The power we hold over the students' success or failure is immense, a power that few recognize more clearly than the students placed under our jurisdiction. Whether or not we actually can teach writing or improve discrete skills may be

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questionable. But we are convinced that we can accurately analyze the quality of a piece of writing. However, our strong convictions and bold actions too often are followed by situations similar to these:

Case 1

The first writing assignment in a literature class is collected and read. The instructor, aghast at the poor quality of the writing, thinks surely the students have enrolled in the course without having had the prequisite composition classes. A check indicates, however, that not only have the students completed the required writing courses, but also they have received grades well within the average to superior range.

Case 2

The dean calls. He wants to know why students petitioning for extension of incomplete grades from composition classes are unable to write intelligible requests.

Case 3

The vice-president considers instituting a literacy examination after receiving complaints from the business community. It seems that many of the college's graduates are unable to write coherent and grammatically standard reports.

Case 4

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Diane, a business major, is called into the academic advisor's office and confronted with the facts: her major professor suspects that she has changed her English grades and plans to recommend explusion from the university. His suspicion is reasonably founded: the only courses she has passed are ones from the English department, and for those courses she has an above average grade point. Failure of all other courses, poorly written assignments submitted to her major professors, and an ACT score of 10 all lead to the inevitable conclusion of cheating. The advisor is shocked to learn that Diane has indeed taken five English courses and received no grade lower than "B."

Case 5

It is time for annual teaching evaluations. As part of the process, the director reviews sets of graded papers, test results, and grade distributions. Overall, test results and grade distributions fall within an acceptable, predictable range. The sets of graded compositions are something else: often grades seem randomly assigned, less on the basis of quality of writing than on some mysterious system known only to the instructors. Papers exhibiting apparently equal skill receive grades ranging from the lowest to highest marks. Some papers contain copious marginal and end notes, others contain only the briefest reference to pages in a handbook or proofreader's marks. Still others contain numerical codes, while a few have no comments at all, only a letter grade. The most mysterious, perhaps, are the papers that bear multiple grades, one marked content, one grammar, another assignment.

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Somehow the director must contend with the questions and criticism implied by these various cases. Someway the disparity must be resolved. Sometimes the instructors' actions are indenfensible.

What I most often find is discouraging, but understandable. The majority of writing instructors are acting out of ignorance. They simply do not know how to evaluate a piece of writing. For the most part, those teaching composition were trained in literature rather than in writing. Many have never taken a writing course, even as an undergraduate. Their speciality is interpretative literary analysis--examining finished works for content, for meaning. These teachers have spent years with edited, polished masterpieces. Few have examined work in progress. Few have had their own writing skills commented on in more than a cursory manner. Yet we put these people with sophisticated training in literary analysis into a composition classroom and expect them to perform with authority.

Many do perform with authority, but too often the authority is based on bluff, a need to appear in control. This need results in haphazard and inconsistent grading methods. They do not know what to look for in a piece of writing, and this ignorance leads to insecurity. It also leads to marking only obvious, countable things such as spelling errors or misused mechanics that are tangential rather than integral parts of writing. They become editors. These instructors feel uncomfortable in the role of judge and may have difficulty separating a student from his work. The instructors' perception vary according to how they feel about the subject or the student. External factors distract them and irrelevant issues impair their concentration. Often the evaluation turns out to be no more than checking for conformity of editing skills or

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marking non-standard grammatical usage. The teachers may well recognize that the quality of the piece of writing is inconsistent with the grade it has received, but do not know how to reconcile the difference. The instructors' only hope is that their efforts do not come back to haunt them.

When working with instructors who exhibit these problems, the first thing I do is to establish a clear role for them: that of reader and critic. By approaching a piece of writing in this role, the instructors will then have a basis for making objective and sensible comments to the students. The areas we concentrate on are content, organization, grammar, and mechanics. Stressing individual areas emphasizes the need to consider the paper as an entire unit that works together to produce an effect on the reader. This approach countermands an instructor's tendency to praise well punctuated nonsense or to overlook startling insights that may be lost in a haze of non-standard conventions. This method also reduces the tendency to overstress one particular aspect of the writing--grammar for instance--to the exclusion of all other areas. The "whole unit" approach gives the instructors a sound basis for commenting about the strengths and weaknesses of the student's work and for making constructive criticisms. Recognizing skills that are well handled is as important as recognizing deficiencies, for writers also need to be told what they are doing right. Students are, unfortunately, used to inconsistent grading practices and often believe that good writing is merely a matter of learning a particular instructor's idiosyncracies. Since few students are mind readers and even fewer instructors readily communicate their idiosyncracies, beginning writers often feel that their producing acceptable writing is a hopeless cause. If this perception that writing well means pleasing subective standards can be

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changed, then the student will be more likely to poduce the type work that does indeed please the instructor. Another reward of this approach is that the instructor will be able to gear teaching toward areas that actually need to be explained rather than randomly assigning work that may prove to be a waste of classtime.

Once instructors become aware of what to look for in a piece of writing, evaluation seems simple and obvious--and perhaps it is. But soon, other questions arise, and for some of these questions the answers are not nearly so easily reached.

One question concerns written comments. Some instructors tend to mark all over a student's paper--in the margins, at the end, through the text, circling, changing, and correcting everything that could be considered the least bit suspect. The literature on this subject seems to indicate that this does the student no good. First, the student is unlikely to read the comments simply because they are overpowering, both in quantity and in quality. The student knows he has done something wrong and can tell how wrong from the grade. Specifics do not matter much, and he probably can not even decipher the comments since they are apt to be written in "professorese." Second, the student already feels incompetent as a writer and does not need the verbal assault to reinforce this notion.

A second question which arises concerns grading revisions of papers on the same topic. Most students think revision means correcting the surface errors marked by the instructors. Often, grades for revised papers should be awarded to

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instructors, not to students. A closely related question is whether to grade a student's potential or only the product.

I respond to all three questions, marking comments, grading revisions, and grading potential, by advising caution. Comments on firt drafts should be sparing and directed primarily toward content and structure. Additional detail, thorough development, and consistency in grammar and mechanics can be elicited through questions. As readers, the instructors can ask for clarification so that the writer will not be misunderstood. The readers should note, of course, that non-standard usage or peculiar sentence structure interfers with the paper, and mark an example, but should present this information as readers who wants to understand the writer, not as judges deliberating about a grade. In the second draft the student will have omitted many of the errors from the original paper even though they may not have been specifically marked. Although the student may not be an expert in using the language, he is familiar enough with it to recognize pecularities when he reads them. If the second draft still contains serious problems, the instructors can again question the presentation, focusing specifically on the problem areas and let the student know that the third draft will be graded and that now is the time to write the paper as well as possible. On the final draft, the instructors should comment on all aspects of the paper, referring to earlier versions as a point of reference. Accepting subsequent drafts, allowing time for revision, then assigning a grade to a final version is, I think, the only way that we can ever consider potential. Essentially, the instructors must evaluate a product, not a promise. But by allowing students adequate time to work on a paper after having had questions raised about it, instructors have insight into students' ability and should be able to fairly

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assess their work.

Once instructors become aware of the areas to look for in determining the quality of a paper and become comfortable with the role of reader and critic, they find themselves relieved of pressures they may have encountered. They are able to objectively assess the quality of a paper without letting subjectivity overrule judgment. Whether or not the instructors agree with the topic is no longer important; they can logically defend their judgment by pointing to objective criteria. The instructors are freed from assigning grades only on the basis of surface structure or emotional response.

Other than improved evaluative methods, the instructors find at least two more benefits from this newly acquired skill: 1) classtime can be more effectively used and 2) writing assignments will be better focused. Because they understand what makes good writing, the instructors will be able to incorporate those ideas into the classroom. The instructors will also be able to construct writing assignments that are focused to elicit the types of information students should consider.

Knowing how to assess the quality of a paper makes instructors' jobs easier. They no longer have to flounder with each paper and finally, in desperation, resort to marking only the obvious, countable things. No longer will they have to find ways to justify a grade to a student. With confidence, they can make the tough decisions about a student's readiness for the next course. Instructors no longer will have to worry about the horror stories that crop up from colleagues and administration and dread to find that the culprit is one of

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their former students.

The problems I have concentrated on are the ones I see most often. They are not the exclusive domain of teaching assistants or first year instructors. Incompetence in paper grading knows no boundaries in the university, and there is enough blame to share with everyone. The problem, though, can be ameliorated. Knowledge can be shared, competence acquired. But until this is done, we will continue to have cases such as those mentioned earlier. Until we have directors who detect the violators and take steps to change their methods or to remove them from composition classes, we all will continue under the pall of suspicion.